

FATHER LIONEL SHAM
FUNERAL HOMILY - TUESDAY 17TH MARCH, 2009

This Homily (sermon) is embargoed until 11am on Tuesday 17 March 2008.

Death is normally expected at the conclusion of old age. The Old Testament speaks of those who die “replete with days.” Abraham died at a ripe old age. He had lived his “full span of years” (Gen.25.8). Old age allows one to prepare oneself for one’s death. It allows one time to look back with gratitude, with appreciation for the graces given. One is then in a position to appropriate the meaning of one’s death. This was not to be in the case of Fr. Lionel Sham. His “earthly dwelling place” was destroyed prematurely. His earthly tent was ripped apart. His breath, like his blood, was poured out (Is.53.12). He fell into the hands of heartless men. He suffered an outrage unworthy of a human being. What is worse is that he was murdered in cold blood by people he knew. The human dogs he used to feed turned on him. There was no forced entry into his house. This was virtually their home too. They returned his kindness with a despicable act of ingratitude, no, worse. They killed a defenceless man who hugged them each time they met. Little did Fr. Sham know that he showed kindness to people who would betray his love. It was greed, sheer human greed that drove them to commit murder. They were not satisfied with the things they stole. They took his life from him.

One can only imagine how painful those last moments must have been for Fr. Lionel Sham. The words of Jesus Christ come to mind, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Nevertheless, let it be as you, not I, would have it” (Mt.26.39).

That must have been moments of painful loneliness, solitude, to Fr. Sham who was a people’s person. Parishioners, family and friends looked for him frantically. We knew that he could not just go away without informing somebody. That would have been out of character. In the hands of his youthful captors he longed for freedom, for relief, for an escape. Lionel

Sham was betrayed with a kiss of Judas. Though he died a painful end and an untimely death, his 42 years of priesthood had not been in vain. He touched the lives of many people. Always kind, always gracious, always

-2-

giving of himself. No task was too small for him; no task was too demanding. He always walked an extra mile with a smile. And yet, we painfully know that a grain of wheat must die in order to yield a rich harvest (Jn.12.24). And that, "if a man serves me, he must follow me" (12.26). Physical death is a necessary means of gaining access to God and to resurrection. The resurrection of Jesus Christ – and we know this in faith "prefigures and already contains in germ the resurrection of all Christians" (1Cor. 15.21). Paradoxically, we mourn the death of Fr. Sham. We are angry that he was slain like an animal. And yet death is a gateway to being integrated into the glorious body of Christ. We would have preferred that he died from sickness, or better still from old age, and not at the hands of vermin.

Once more, the difficult words of Jesus Christ have come to haunt us "You have learnt that it was said to our ancestors: Eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But I say, offer the wicked man no resistance ... love your enemies" (Mt.5.38,44).

Mohlakeng, my own hometown, my own place of birth, your own sons have killed a priest and left him in the veldt to be devoured by dogs.

There is an increasing number of priests and religious who are being targeted by robbers. They are gagged, stabbed and beaten up. Some have been killed like Fr. Declan Collins in Ennerdale, Fr. Thabo Mokomela in Vosloorus, Fr. Daniel Mahula in Klerksdorp, Fr. Allard Mako in Nelspruit. In South Africa people face death every day. We live in fear of potential robbers. South Africa is breeding a generation of criminals, animals, who have no regard for the worth of human life; who have no respect for

property that belongs to others. This culture of impunity has to be reversed. The other day in Randfontein, a friend narrated how his son is currently serving a sentence of 41 years for killing a man and his girlfriend out of jealousy. We have become such an intolerant and irascible society. Road rage has claimed many lives. We even tolerate men who abduct and rape children. Many say

-3-

this is a South African way of life. But each one of us has the moral duty to promote and live the virtues of patience, self-control and respect for the inestimable value of life. We have a moral and civic duty to promote the rule of law. Our society appears civilized on the outside, but at its core, it is a terribly sick society. With economic recession looming large on the horizon, with many likely to swell the ranks of the unemployed, does it mean that violent crime will be on the increase? God forbid. It is imperative that we tirelessly promote that which is noble in us as human beings, that we uphold courageously those moral and spiritual qualities, which distinguish us as human beings created in the image of God.

On behalf of the Archdiocese and on my own behalf, I wish to express our condolences to the family of Fr. Lionel Sham.

Thank you for the gift of Fr. Lionel.

This priest had a heart of gold. He was simple, humble and dedicated.

I wish to thank the South African Police for their quick and coordinated professional response.

In memory of Fr. Lionel Sham, and as part of our effort to uphold the rule of law and to support the police in their daunting task of protecting lives and combating crime, we propose that we take up a collection and pledges from individuals to support the police by buying a car for their work. We also challenge other churches and communities to do the same in an effort to raise awareness about our moral obligation and civic duty, to create a

crime-free and safe environment for all. I appeal to your generosity and the desire to become involved. We are each other's keeper.

+ Buti Tlhagale

Cathedral of Christ the King

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